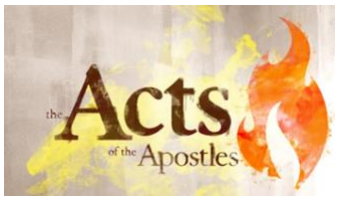
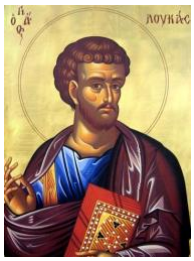
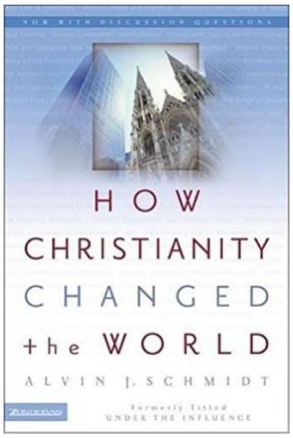
20180715 Acts 6:1-4 Resolving Conflict in the Church



"Acts of the Apostles: Lesson 13" by Faber McMullen, Union Grove Baptist Church ©2018

"Getting Real With God"
"Resolving Conflict in the Church"





Last week we saw Rabbi Gamaliel caution the Sanhedrin concerning their handling of the nascent church. He warned, "*38 And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; 39 but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it—lest you even be found to fight against God."* (Acts 5:38-39, NKJV). Together, we reviewed the impact of the Church upon humanity for the last 2,000 years. Gamaliel's warning proved to be true. The Church has not been overthrown. Christian men and women, acting as the hands and heart of Jesus, have impacted the world and made it a better place. In spite of Gamaliel's warning, the disciples were whipped before being released. That reminded us that belief in Christ often brings with it persecution. The attacks on the church from outside subsided for the moment, but as often happens, Satan turned his attack on the Church from within.

Please stand with me as we honor the reading of God's Word.

➔***6*** *Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. 2 Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. 3 Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; 4 but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."* (Acts 6:1-4, NKJV).

We don't exactly know when this happened because Dr. Luke says, "In those days." Some scholars have dated this event at perhaps five years or so since the resurrection. The text tells us that the number of disciples "was multiplying." The Church was in full on growth. Often, when a group is just trying to survive conflicts remain at a minimum. But, it seems that for whatever reason, as survival seems assured and growth ensues, so comes conflict. As things get larger there is more opportunity for disagreement.

Let me first give you a little background to what is going on. The Church was still almost totally Jewish at this point, but it was becoming filled with Jews from many different places. There were some native Jews

from what we now call the State of Israel or Palestine. Those are the ones that Dr. Luke is calling "Hebrews." They had always been there and had never left. But, other Jews in the congregation, had returned from the Diaspora. The Hebrews spoke Aramaic which was pretty much a derivative of Hebrew. The Jews who had come from other countries, had adopted Greek as their language and they had become what we call "Hellenized." The Greeks called their country Hellas and they called themselves Hellenes. This is where the term Hellenized comes from. They became "Greek" not only in their language, but in many of their customs and attitudes as well.

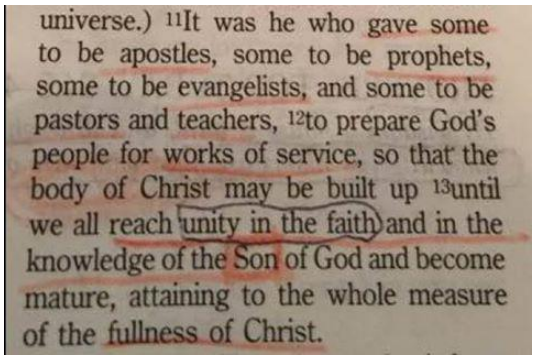
What was going on in the Church in Jerusalem was a clash of cultures. The Hellenistic Jews felt the Hebrews were treating their own widows preferentially. To put it in our own terminology, the Church had a system of taking food and other needed items to widows in the congregation. This is what Dr. Luke calls the "daily distribution" (*Tamhuy* in Hebrew). The act of taking care of widows and orphans is something that has always been at the heart of Jewish service. This same service carried over into the New Testament and into Christian living. James, the brother of Jesus, said, *"26 If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless. 27 Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world."* (James 1:26-27, NKJV).

The early Church was living this out but friction had arisen. The Greek-speaking Jews began to complain that their widows were not getting equal treatment. As the church increased and came to include more and more of these Hellenistic converts, there is no doubt that the different groups socialized with their own kind. The Hellenists weren't trying to exclude the Hebrews or vice-versa, but each group just felt comfortable with people speaking their own respective language. The text doesn't seem to infer that this incident was some sort of huge problem in the community, but it was just the result of human behavior.

Think of it this way. We all know that Sister Kathy takes food to our shut-ins at Union Grove. She goes weekly to Mrs. Drunell's house to check on her and take food to her. If, by chance, we were to have a shut-in who speaks no English, Kathy would just naturally find it easier going to take care of Mrs. Drunell since they both speak the same language. She might end up giving more time to Mrs. Drunell than to a non English-speaker. I think that was the kind of thing that was going on in this instance cited by Dr. Luke. These sorts of divisions are natural to us. It is sort of based on the comfort we feel when we're socializing and fellowshipping with people of our own culture and language. I think the Hellenist widows were being overlooked, but the text doesn't suggest that it was deliberate or on purpose.

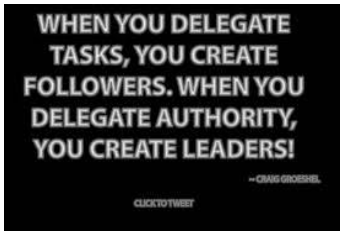
So, let's talk about that for a minute. Even in our own little church body we have a multitude of people from different cultures. In this little congregation we have people who were born in Latin America. We have two ethnic Jews in our congregation. We have others who have origins in England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Poland, Germany, Sweden, the Philippines, and even some who are part American Indian

(like my lovely bride). We are a beautiful mix of people from all nations of the world. I think this is a good thing. In fact, I think it is a great thing. Why do I feel this way? Because, if variety and differences weren't important to God, He wouldn't have made them. I also think it is a beautiful thing because we will be together as a family for all of eternity so we might as well get used to one another right here. Jesus died on the cross for the whole world. That means He died for you and He died for me. As I've grown older I've come to understand in a truly fundamental way that God made one race, the human race. "[9] After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, [10] and crying out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation *belongs* to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Revelation 7:9-10 NKJV). Our ethnicities and differences will follow us to heaven.


universe.) [11]It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, [12]to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up [13]until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

So now let's look at the response of the Apostles. The text tells us that first they understood their calling and were determined to not let anything get in the way of their assigned ministry. They realized that God had called them to preach the gospel, not to solve every problem in the church. This is an important principle for us each to understand. When I first began to pastor Union Grove, I personally had to do much of what physically needed to be done. Sandy and I repaired sheetrock and painted. If a toilet didn't flush or a switch didn't work I was involved in the repair. Quickly, Tim, Diane, and others appeared and assumed these responsibilities. Also, improvements and repairs anonymously appeared. Solar lights mysteriously appeared on our front sign. Vacuum cleaners showed up. I came one Sunday and all new furniture had appeared in our conversation area in the Fellowship Hall. Last week I found a new microwave in the kitchen. This is the Holy Spirit moving peoples' hearts to take care of the body of Christ.

One Tim wasn't enough so God sent me two "Tims." Tim Sandlin and Tim Levy were there for me, and together we just sort of picked away at one thing after another. We chased leaks, fixed wiring, blew speakers, chased raccoons, went to war with wasps, dug septic lines, and the list goes on and on. I quickly realized that I could not do it on my own. God had called me to teach you, my congregation, the Word. That is my job. I cannot be your best friend. I cannot solve all of your needs. I cannot be the person you call in the middle of the night (you're supposed to call a deacon! LOL). My job here is to study God's Word each week and to seek God's direction and communicate how you each can apply it to your lives. These Apostles had the wisdom to understand that. So, what did they do?



They called all of the disciples together. That means they had a church meeting. Then something beautiful happened. They clarified the role to which God had called them, and they instructed the members of the church to select a group of seven persons to take care of this need. They also instructed that those seven should be selected from the group that felt slighted, to insure that no widow was left unattended.

[5] *And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch,* [6] *whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.* (Acts 6:5-6, NKJV).

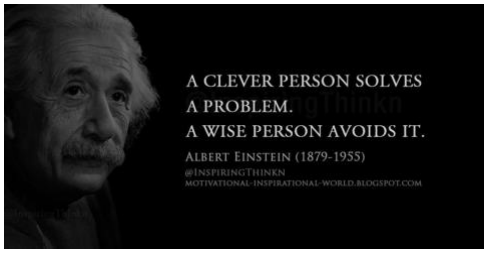
What is significant about this list is that these are people with Greek names. They were outside of the main group of the Hebrews and had been the principle authority and control in the early Jerusalem church. Those in leadership trusted God to lead instead of trusting only in themselves and their own abilities.

This shows a definite attitude of humility, trust, and love for the other party in the dispute. Likewise it shows great wisdom in their willingness to delegate, and to delegate to those not in "their" group. However, being responsible leaders, they established certain guidelines to qualify those who would be entrusted with the duty of distributing the money, the meals, etc. The text tells us that the qualifications were that the selected people should be:

People of a good reputation - inside and outside of the community of faith.

Full of the Holy Spirit - yielded to God's will and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Wise persons - Not foolish but wise in every way.



We need to be careful that we put people in charge of various ministries in our church who are people of good reputation. This includes having a good reputation out in the world. The second qualification is that they be the sort of believer who is yielded to the will of God and the power of the Holy Spirit. And lastly, the person is to be a wise person. The first two are pretty easy to figure out, but just what makes a wise person wise? A wise person is the opposite of a fool. The Bible has much to say about wisdom and fools. You can read the Book of Proverbs and if you make a point to underline everything about wisdom and foolishness, and if you prayerfully ask God to apply it to your heart you will become wise. I think it is important for us to be able to recognize a wise person. Here are a few indicators of wisdom:

1. A wise person has a readiness to listen to others. A fool has to talk all of the time.
2. A wise person learns something from everyone he/she meets.
3. A wise person is a prudent person. They think through the consequences of their actions or words before they are done or are spoken.
4. A wise person is a temperate person. They have a governor on their life which allows them to be a balanced person. This means that they understand how to balance work, play, spiritual matters, physical health, etc.
5. A wise person listens to God and godly instruction. A fool listens only to those who flatter him/her.

Plato and other philosophers have said such things as, "Wise men speak because they have something to say; Fools speak because they have to say something." "A wise man never knows it all, but fools know everything." "Do not correct a fool or he will hate you.

Correct a wise man and he will appreciate you." "It's said that a wise person learns from his mistakes. A wiser one learns from others' mistakes. But the wisest person of all learns from others' successes."

So what are the major truths that we can take from this account, and how can we apply them to our lives?

1. If the church is "of God" it cannot be overthrown. Church's are overthrown when they begin to deny the authority of God's Word. The Bible is the true inspired Word of God and when pieces of the church begin to deny the same, they wither to nothing. Do you see the Bible as God's inspired revealed truth for mankind?

2. Preferential treatment in the church can be toxic. Since the beginning, the church has consisted of people of different languages, cultures, and races. Churches that have not been able to overcome these differences have ended up in the dustbin of church history. God will not work through churches that are social country clubs or that focus on cultural or racial uniformity. Are you uncomfortable around others of different cultures or races? If so, give it to God and ask Him to help you see others as He sees them.

3. The pastor/elder/bishop's primary job in the church is to preach the gospel and to teach the Bible to the congregation, so that the members can clearly understand how to apply God's Word to their hearts and lives. Are you praying for your pastor through the week? Are you supporting him in his teaching and ministry? Do you understand that he is called by God and not by men?

4. Leadership in ministry must be selected according to a high standard. People should be put in charge of ministries based on their qualifications of having a good reputation, by being filled and guided by the Holy Spirit, and by being very wise people. The positions in the early church were not filled by an "elite" group based on ethnicity or language. They were filled by people who were wise in the things of the world and in the things of God.

What were the results of a church that operated like this? The text tells us, *"7 Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith."* (Acts 6:7, NKJV).

We should realize that we too should handle conflicts as we've seen them handled by the early church. Conflicts will come, but the church that prays together stays together. We each have a role in this work, and if we're doing what we're each supposed to be doing, the number of disciples right here in Whitehall, Navasota, Grimes County, and the United States will be multiplied greatly.

Let us pray.

Union Grove is one of the oldest Baptist communities of faith in the State of Texas dating back to 1844. Pastor Faber McMullen may be reached by email at uniongrove362@gmail.com or by snail mail at: 15301 FM 362, Navasota, Texas 77868. Tel: 936-825-1227 (Edited and proofed by Amanda Fryday - Webster, Texas.) All financial gifts to this ministry are tax-deductible as a 501 (c) (3) Corporation.